Old Granddad

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/45782770.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Original Work
Additional Tags:	Texas, Kentucky, Family Dynamics
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Ojalá: A Texas Trilogy
Stats:	Published: 2023-03-16 Updated: 2024-12-18 Words: 18,537 Chapters: 18/?

Old Granddad

by ylzzirf

Summary

Three cousins, the messes they made, the secrets they tried to keep, and the promises they never broke.

(Dedicated to Sugar, who understands everything I've ever told her, and everything I've never told her.)

“Life is absurd, but I’ll go on living.”

A Meeting

Two hundred years ago, a man packed up and moved his family from Tennessee to Texas. Somehow, the man's family ended up moving back east to Kentucky. And in the years since, nearly all of his descendants have wandered between Kentucky and Texas. It's a right of passage in our family — to go from the strip mine to the cattle ranch, or the other way around, and to try to make it back in one piece.

There are dozens of us cousins. But there are three of us that are the same age — one in Alabama, one in Arkansas, and one in Kentucky. The one in Kentucky stayed closest to the family elders, but she was miserable, and didn't even try to hide it. She was envious of the other two — because in her mind, *Alabama* meant *beaches* and *Arkansas* meant *Texas*. She spent so much time visiting Arkansas that she'd nearly driven her tires bald. She could afford to stay a couple weeks here and there in Arkansas, but she couldn't afford new tires for that old Mazda. It was impossible to convince her to look at new tires *or* a new truck.

She wasn't annoying, not really, because she was generally pretty conscientious. She was stubborn, sure, but she was sensitive. She would sit and cry and tell us that they used limestone from in front of her house to build the prison that our cousins worked in, and where one of our cousins lived.

"Do you ever visit him?" Raina asked her. For once, Raina and I were visiting Alma in Kentucky. We decided to have coffee together, sitting by the water, watching the barges roll down the river.

"Nah, I don't visit him," Alma said. "But I ought to. He didn't molest anybody, which is a mark in his favor. But he killed a man, and … well, at least he didn't kill a child."

Raina nodded. "What about your other cousin? Weren't you telling Parker here that you have another one in the pen?"

"Yeah, I've got another cousin — *had* one, anyway. Mom's side of the family. He's strung out on fentanyl or something awful, right? He's in prison, too, but they put him in that minimum security joint."

"The one in Fremont?"

"The one and the same. Christmas rolls around, and he decides he's gonna escape while he's on a work detail or something. So he does. People do it all the time, but he leaves a day or two before Christmas. Horrible timing. Christ, you wouldn't believe the mess. They're hunting for him, tracking him through the woods with the dogs, and then—"

"Did they catch him?" Raina asked. She usually pretended to be disinterested, but she couldn't help herself whenever it came to stories about criminal activity.

"I was gettin' to that. Anyway. I had my momentum and everything. Let me wind it back up again. The police were out combing the woods, some of *our* cousins were in on the search,

and half the county actually locked their doors for once, because they were telling people he could be armed and dangerous. People were scared shitless. And then they found him — propped up right against a tree. Froze to death at the edge of the woods."

Alma didn't smoke, as far as we knew, but she pulled the kind of face that made you think of a menthol cigarette. Impossible not to feel something cool and unsettling floating through your lungs.

"Let me tell you. After that all was over, the family didn't have much more to complain about. I'm sure that was the first good night's sleep his wife had in years."

"Alma, you're so soft when it comes to family things. Knowing that you can talk like that about your own cousin, it really says something about you."

"What? That some of my cousins mean more to me than others?"

We sat there, watching the water, and didn't say much else. We didn't have to.

Trap Ease

There was only one thing we didn't like about Alma. The way she treated her boyfriend was atrocious. She didn't think of him as a boyfriend, but he absolutely saw her as his future wife. They were both confused, but I didn't see that as much of an excuse.

I asked her how and why they ended up together. She told me that she bumped into him about twelve years after they'd graduated. (It was actually thirteen years after, but she was too superstitious to tell me the exact number.) They were shopping at the same dollar store; they were both buying deodorant. Alma was also buying tampons, but she didn't really feel the need to hide them from him. She felt comfortable around him. She stood there with all of her stuff balanced on her hip, and didn't mind taking time to play catch up. They blocked the aisle for thirty minutes, cutting up and talking about high school memories.

"I don't remember you being so hot — so beautiful, I mean — back when we were in school," he'd said. He didn't ordinarily say the wrong thing like that, but he was already feeling flustered. She knew how to be charming, how to make a man feel funny — sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way.

Alma was actually feeling raw that day, and she was loaded for bear — but instead of being dismissive, she thought she might give him one chance. Just one.

"I don't remember if I was hot or not, either," she said. "But I don't remember a lot about school. I tried to forget everything I didn't need to remember."

He laughed. They exchanged phone numbers. And the rest unfolded as it typically does, whenever two lonely people decide to settle for each other.

Mr. Sands — that was his name. He was a student when she was, though, and not a teacher. So it seemed weird that she would always call him Mr. Sands. Any time she mentioned him, it was *mister* this and *mister* that. I'm embarrassed to say that it took me two weeks to realize that she didn't want any of us to know his full name.

This wasn't because he was a bad guy. She just didn't want any of us to get too attached to him. The plan with Mr. Sands was to use him for his money, to date him for a little while, and then to dump him when she found someone "better." But then she couldn't find anybody better. She only found out that she couldn't shake him. So she tolerated his presence, mostly because she pitied him.

He was still hot, she admitted, but he was a single dad. That limited his prospects. I wondered why she was dating a single dad if she was wanting to date for *money*, but it was her choice. She said he had a decent job — but none of us knew what he did. She *really* didn't want anyone to get to know him. I don't think she thought anyone would steal him — it seems like she thought people in the family would start liking him more than they liked her.

At the same time, Alma was convinced that they were two arcs that had crossed at a crest and a trough — at thirty, her looks were improving and his were fading. This was because he

spent a lot of time eating chicken nuggets with his daughter — that was Alma's theory, not mine.

But it felt fun. They were on a trapeze together, and she was about to let go of his hands, and she knew she wouldn't catch him. She knew she would let him fall. And it thrilled her — she was really looking forward to it. She could hardly wait; she could hardly hide the fact that she wanted to watch him fall out from under her.

Raina

We are the great-great-great granddaughters of the Yellow Rose of Texas — if the Yellow Rose were a man. This great-grandfather of ours was one-sixteenth Black. With each generation, the sliver of the pie got smaller — but we were still aware of percentages and fractions.

Raina hated blood quantum mathematics. She told a group of us that the one-drop rule was bullshit. This wasn't because she wanted to hide her heritage, but because she knew there were people who would be cruel to someone who was "distantly Black."

"You see those stories about how those Klansmen shoot themselves when they find out their granddaddy was Creole. Not Cajun, but *Creole*. Anyway, I don't want to be judged by some racist ass just because of who my granddaddy was. But I also don't want to have to introduce myself as a percentage. It seems disrespectful on multiple fronts — it feels like a way of negating something. Like I'm being proud to *not* be completely something. I just am what I am and I'm not what I'm not."

"What do you mean? Completely something?"

"I'm saying that some people make it seem like, *well, at least I'm a little exotic* or *I knew I had some flavor — this is why I like spicy food*! Please. The reason that some of us have 'that flavor' is because … like … the legacy of slavery. I don't know any other way to say it. It's sad. I'm not embarrassed. I'm just upset to think about a woman having been stolen. Mistreated. Abused."

Raina was generally talkative and opinionated — but on this, I understood where she was coming from. I agreed with her more often than not — especially on issues like this. And this was something she was passionate about. I can't say I blame her. I was proud of our ancestors for having survived hardship — but I also felt pained at the thought of a woman being forced away from her family, forced onto a dangerous boat on a dangerous ocean, forced into slavery in the so-called New World. This New World was full of old hurts — and the pain lasted for years, for centuries, for *generations*.

It made my stomach clench. Raina, though, she was more action-oriented than I could even dream of being. I mean, I was active — but where I hesitated, she would march bravely onward.

Raina was, by way of her mother *and* her father, an Accidental Creole. Her mother had a family tree full of Spaniards and French folks, and a father — well, her father was on our side. Between the French ancestors and our Congolese ancestors, and the fact that she'd spent her whole life in the South, she felt like she was at least partially Creole. But she never said it out loud — outside of our family and a few close friends — for fear of looking like a fraud.

While she hated the idea of blood quantum mathematics, Raina was deeply aware of the fact that she was 1/256th African. And that was just what she was aware of — she knew that there

was an entire world of things she knew nothing about. Raina was the type of person who wanted to know the names of every bird, all the flowers, the different types of trees, and so on. It wasn't a matter of classification — it was a matter of recognition. She wanted to recognize everything and everyone. And so, in the interest of recognizing and acknowledging the ancestors she knew about, she felt like she needed to openly embrace this aspect of her background, even if she felt more than an little awkward.

And *this* left her feeling like she needed to be more active, feeling like she had to account for all the times one set of ancestors had harmed another set. In the spring of her senior year, Raina and one of her friends (a Spanish Creole girl, born in Louisiana, raised in Arkansas) tried to steal a replica Pinta when it docked somewhere along the Little River. They didn't really do anything besides untie it from a dock, but the Pinta people were furious and the high school principal came down hard on them.

They both thought it was funny — and her friend told her it wasn't so bad, seeing as they were both not going to face charges for what they'd done. If anything, it was more like a senior prank. And they weren't messing with people — they were messing with property. Symbolic property, for crying out loud — the replica wasn't an artifact. It was just a symbol.

Raina also didn't care if it ruined her reputation in her hometown — although it didn't. If anything, she became more popular those last few weeks of high school, when people were able to put a face to a name from a funny story. But she didn't plan on staying in the area forever. She ended up moving an hour away — to Texarkana.

This thrilled Alma, who believed that if someone was playing a steel guitar in Texarkana, you'd be able to hear it in Paris. For her, this was closer than ever to getting back to our roots.

"Alma, that's the same town where they dragged a young Black man to death," Raina said. "I'm not spending *any* money out there. I won't even visit — so I'd never live there. Never ever."

"What about the people who actually do live there, though? A quarter of the people there aren't —"

"Alma. We aren't going to fight about this. You aren't going to change my mind. I know that maybe you want to meet our cousins, and that's fine. But I don't think we need to go and do anything performative —"

"So that incident with the Pinta? That wasn't performative?"

Before Alma had time to laugh, Raina was out of her chair. She grabbed Alma by the hair, pulling her across the floor, and then flipping her onto her stomach. She pinned her down with one knee.

"Want to give me a piggyback ride?"

"No," Alma squalled. "You know my back already hurts — don't sit on me, you cow."

"You're bigger than me," Raina said.

”And you’re stronger than me.”

For Raina, this was enough. She stood up and let her go.

Outside Looking In

“I think that was it — all that I wanted to tell you,” I said. “I felt like everyone at work thought I was stupid. Just because I tried to help, and even though I *did* help. But I guess trying to help makes people think you’re soft and silly.”

“They probably judge people,” Raina said. “But that’s okay. We all judge people. I’m an excellent judge of character — I can always tell whether someone’s on or off. You can’t be on all the time. Some people are on all the time. On drugs, too.”

“On drugs, my ass. I’ve never done drugs,” I said. “But the drinking — that’s a problem we share. I know I told y’all I was going to quit drinking so much, but I’m back in the saddle again. Every so often, I have to have something. But it’s not like an addiction — not yet. It’s more like a social crutch.”

“Can’t beat the company of Old Granddad.” Raina drained her glass and — after looking sideways at me — decided not to pour another one.

Inside Out

“Used to, all it took was seeing other people get engaged,” Alma said. She had called me just to complain. “That shit would make my stomach hurt. Now, I don’t care. Actually, I start feeling sick when he talks about how nice it would be for us to live together. I always tell him that I’m not planning on living in Kentucky forever — that I’ll be leaving for Texas before another year or two.”

They were lying in bed together when she’d broached the topic.

“You see, I’m planning on going off somewhere. For a very long time, maybe.”

“Prison?” Mr. Sands said. He was kidding. Maybe.

“No. Overseas.”

“Texas isn’t overseas.”

“No, it’s not. I’m going to go on a trip, first, before I plan on moving out there. A trip with a relative.”

“Male or female?”

“Female. But it hardly matters — I already told you, it’s a relative.”

“I thought you might be trying to sneak something by me.”

Alma was always sneaking something by him, but this insinuation made her knuckles whiten. She could tolerate spending a little more time with him — but her heart was already hundreds of miles away, in a rental house in Texas.

Treatment

“Hair of the dog is a kind of homeopathy,” Raina said. “That’s how I take it, anyway.”

“Is that advice you’re giving, or advice you’re taking?” I asked.

“Giving,” she said. “I’m not drinking right now, if that’s what you’re implying. I’ll be driving all day.”

“No, no. We’ll swap at the next rest stop.”

“I’m the only one who drives this car. Now, keep me entertained. Tell me that story you mentioned earlier. The one about that musician, you know, who sent his daughter to your college. The two of your were in the same sorority, right? Tell me all about them.”

So I did. I told her everything.

“*That’s* the American dream,” Raina said. “Be like Elvis. Lift your parents out of poverty and have grandkids that are movie stars.”

“My little isn’t a movie star. She’s working on her own album, though, so —”

“*Good grief*. But good for her.”

“Yeah. It’s a folk album, and —”

”Jesus. Can people who grew up in mansions be folk artists? They aren’t even *folks* — they’re too fancy to be folks.” She laughed, and then her face hardened. “I’m serious.”

“I didn’t think you weren’t.”

“Listen. The other day, I told someone, *‘It looks like a trailer park puked on your truck. All that chrome — and I can say that, because my cousin still lives in a trailer park.’* Well, we both laughed, but I knew that I shouldn’t say something like that, Parker. And the only reason I can even get away with saying something like that is because I’m not rich, either.”

She paused, just to catch her breath, and started back up. “It made me feel meaner than I really am. I’m a pretty good person, despite my worst tendencies.”

Raina waited a few minutes before starting back up again. “I told someone the other day, *No one wants you. A one-eyed dog wouldn’t hump your leg.* And we’re friends, so I can write it off as just joking. But I don’t like myself when I get ornery like that. Sometimes it feels like the older I get, the meaner I get. Do you feel that way, too?”

As we pulled back out on the highway, I turned to Raina.

“When we stop to take another bathroom break, let’s switch drivers. I don’t want you getting worn out.”

She snorted. “*Bathroom break.* You’re too classy to say *piss* — I already knew that. But I bet you can’t even bring yourself to say pee.”

”I can say pee.”

”You’re saying *pea*, like the green kind. I can hear it in your tone. If you were a chicken, you wouldn’t be able to lay eggs after seeing that it all comes out of the same hole. But that’s life — it all comes out of the same hole. Listen. I know you’re classy, Dr. Morris, but you can let your hair down with me.”

As she said this, she patted her head. Raina had thick Irish-dancer’s-wig curls, big spirals spinning out in all directions. She’d teased me about my own limp curls, which weren’t as tight, but were also pretty full. When we first got in the car, I told her that I needed new hair product recommendations, and she told me that she was always on a quest to try something different. She’d told me the one great disappointment in her haircare journey was the silk pillowcase, which she didn’t think made a bit of difference. I told her that silk pillowcases always worked for me. And then she told me that we definitely had different curl types, and that she would probably just try wrapping her hair in the pillowcase next time.

I reached over and pinched the end of one of her curls. “Okay, then. If we’re letting our hair down, then let’s talk about Alma and her boyfriend.”

“Which one?” She sighed. “The single dad? Man, I keep going back to this — who dates a single dad if they say they’re dating with money in mind? My hand to God, she’s trapping a man who’s already trapped. So the way I see it, they’re just playing a game of rock, paper, scissors. But rest assured, paper will eventually beat rock. What I’m trying to say is, the weaker one will win in the long run. It’ll all balance out, *I* think. So don’t you worry about her taking advantage of him.”

Raina fidgeted with the car’s paddle shifters, even though she didn’t need to shift gears at all. She just did stuff like that sometimes — stuff that nobody else would do. Anybody else would think she was irritated — and it’s true that Alma could irritate her — but it seemed like she was enjoying our gossip.

“I guess the road from Lamesa to Paris stays hot,” I said. “What with Alma starting to relocate out here. She’s glad to have cousins on both sides of the state, she says.”

“*Out here* — she knows better than to try to get me to make social calls in *either* of those places. I mean, other than us coming to visit her together. I can tolerate it if you’re with me. But you’re right. The road stays so hot that it might as well be burnt. And even if she were to die this second, the road would stay busy. She’ll be haunting Texas thirty or forty years after she’s gone.”

“Why stop there? Why not three hundred years from now?” I asked.

“Do you really think Texas will be here then?”

“God willing. At least for Alma’s sake. She’ll haunt it even if it becomes the Great Republic of Cowlots and Pumpjacks.”

“Let me tell you something,” Raina said. “I used to think she was the weakest one of us. But she’s tougher than you think. She’s so tough she can digest corn.”

Ranch-Style Beans

For about a year, Raina had been looking for Dearbhla, a small weasel. She was waiting for Dearbhla — *Dearbhla Monica Weasel,* to use her full name — to come back, and Raina figured she could trap her if she could trick her into coming up to the porch. She wanted to catch that white weasel ever since she'd seen it crossing the highway across from her house. It was on an unseasonably warm afternoon, and she had half a mind that she was just imagining things. But if it really existed, she *would* trap it. Not "it" — *Dearbhla*.

Raina had developed a quasi-emotional connection to the weasel, so she'd named it. She knew she'd never name any children, so she assigned names to animals whenever she felt the urge to test out the sound of two words together. Sometimes, even if the names didn't match, they stuck — and so the weasel the weight of a rather unwieldy name. What did it matter, given that most weasels wouldn't answer to anything? If anything, it was a kindness. Recognition. Recognition of a kindred spirit — a wild, fretful thing.

Raina never planned on having kids with anybody. In her mind, there were types of guys in the area, and she was able to classify all of these types. There were the guys who didn't work, the guys who wore mustard-yellow gum boots down at the chicken plant, and the guys out on the barge who never wore condoms — and none of these guys were of interest to her.

She'd had friends who'd worked out at the chicken plant, and the only ones who stayed cheerful were the ones who knew they'd be leaving. They knew they'd never need to catch or debone a chicken again — not if they could get on at the nursing home, the dollar store, the barge company. Everyone else at the plant was worn out or worn down — everyone except for the fresh-faced Amish kids. The only reason they didn't look worn out — yet — was because they were on Rumspringa *and* meth. In a few months, they'd be just as miserable as everyone else at the chicken plant. Raina avoided *all* of those men, because she didn't want to wade through the layers of mucky men and meth addicts, to try to find a diamond buried under all the chicken shit.

The men on the barge were, generally speaking, even more unpleasant. It seems like most of them had two or three families who they were only pretending to support. Raina didn't want to be somebody's fourth wife. *Fourth wife* sounded just as unsettling as *Fourth Baptist Church*. *What had happened to all of the others?*

Raina couldn't stomach any of the local men. Not for settling down with, not even for spending the night with. If she did any dating, she did it out-of-town. It didn't stop other women from *buying local* — but she could never bring herself to sniff around those guys. Even going beyond that, she knew that naming a child wasn't really in her future. So she decided to use two "whimsical" baby names on her semi-mythical pet. She knew that, with a little love and work, she could catch — and befriend — Dearbhla Monica.

If anyone else told me about this, I would think they were half-ignorant. But I'd seen Raina catch groundhogs and possums. She also caught skunks, but that wasn't something she bragged about. I knew she had the energy and the know-how to capture just about any

animal. Once she became interested in a project, she would see it to its conclusion or solution. But she was more concerned about setting reachable goals than trying to go out of her way to prove she was doing something important with her life.

That was why it mattered to her — she wanted to do something she *could* do, without worrying about whether she should concentrate on something more noteworthy.

"I don't have to prove that I'm relevant," Raina had said to me. "You all know that. I wouldn't want to live in a castle in Scotland, or in a mansion by the beach. I need something familiar, like a small house or a nice double-wide."

She never mentioned it much, but she'd grown up in a semi-hoard. Her mother bought tchotchkes and dinner sets from the local dollar stores. These plates crowded cabinets, spilled over onto the counters, and eventually had to be stacked up in the laundry room. They'd have to take plates off the washer every time they needed to use it. Eventually, Raina and her dad used some of the plates for target practice — and it was a relief to watch them splinter into shrapnel. They'd finally served a greater purpose. They'd finally been used.

Raina hated dollar stores, naturally. She preferred to shop online — and she only ever purchased something when she realized she would make full use of it. She'd look online for decor for her dream tiny home — a home even smaller than the place she'd been renting from some cousins. She bought a rug that looked like a Cheez-It. She bought a garbage can that looked like a can of soup, tin lid and all. She bought a second can-can, which was decorated with a Ranch-Style Beans label. She also found an old DARE t-shirt and planned on picking off or making through the "kids off" part, so that it would say "DARE TO KEEP ___ ___ DRUGS."

Raina didn't just like controversial things; she didn't try to be eccentric. In fact, she was just like everyone else: she wanted to enjoy the things she enjoyed, even if those things seemed silly.

I always figured if Alma won the lottery, she'd immediately go out and buy new clothes, a new car, a boat, all sorts of pointless stuff. I can't say I wouldn't do the same thing. I like nice clothes. But Raina wouldn't buy anything expensive. If Raina won the lottery, she would use it as an excuse to keep being eccentric. She'd be the first one to tell you that people don't just tolerate eccentric rich people — they *worship* them. So no new stuff for her — other than getting a little more respect. And who wouldn't want that?

Outside of a few "unusual" pieces of decor that were mass produced — *so how unusual could they really be?* — Raina wasn't big on acquiring worldly possessions. She was really quite the minimalist. So long as things were arranged the way she liked them, she didn't care how much or how little she had.

When we were kids, the three of us were competitive — the two Valentine girls and the Morris girl, whose mother was a Valentine.

Raina was the most forceful, but Alma was probably more competitive. We would have four-leaf clover finding contests, and Raina usually won. She's always been more determined to

not let something beat her. Raina was more determined in general — but Alma was more determined to win by any means necessary. Alma would start pulling up regular clovers, and then she'd start splitting the leaves in half, bisecting them into droopy blades.

"These have six leaves now," Alma would say, waving a little bouquet of clovers under our noses. "So I win."

At that point, Raina would snatch them out of her hand and rip them apart. "There — now there are twenty leaves. Just leaves, no stems. So it doesn't count. *I win*."

During our ride across Texas, I asked Raina about this. "Hell, I don't remember any of that. I don't know why any of us cared so much. If anything, a four-leaf clover is just a three-leaf clover that studied abroad. Too special for the rest of us."

She paused, and I knew what was coming.

"Didn't you do a study abroad? A trip to Europe?"

"I did. Six months in Spain."

"Damn. That's partly my territory — you know that, though. I wish they'd let me have a shake at that. Spain. But I'm too old now."

"You're thirty-two."

"But I'm not a student. The only studying abroad I did was studying *a broad.* And I didn't do any studying. I was the broad the guy experimented on."

"Uh-huh. Listen," I said. "Have you ever thought about writing a book? It might help to get some of those thoughts out of your head."

"*No.* No books for me. I don't mind books, of course, but the actual writing is out of the question." She laughed. "Of course, someday … I might want to write a memoir. I might want to share some nasty secrets."

I knew she had plenty of those. She was always so good about protecting herself, but she took care to protect other people.

At the end of the day, Raina was looking out for herself — someday, though, her white knight (or white weasel) would come along, and she'd try to protect him. Not to defend him when he did wrong, no. I fjust igured she'd protect her precious weasel from the meanest wolves.

"I'm not a romantic," she'd told me. "But I do get sentimental. It's like The Stanley Brothers, that thing about love being mainly just memories. And that's me. I love the memory of a man more than the man himself."

I didn't believe this. Not entirely. I believed that she had enough memories for three memoirs. But I also knew she wanted the real thing, and that she was determined to grab it by the horns, the fur, or the collar.

Over Easy

“A book. I can’t imagine writing a book,” Raina said. “Especially a memoir. Every time I have a profound thought about something, I try to forget it instantly.”

“Why?”

“Somebody else has probably said it before or said it better. But if it comes back to me, and keeps coming back to me, then I let it take up space in my mind. I keep it rolling around up there. But I still don’t write it down. Now, you know, if I ever get a really good idea — a *really* good one — I’ll try to write a song.”

“Have you ever written a song before?”

“No,” she said. “Well, yes. The one about the jet-ski.”

“How does that one go?”

“Oh, it’s just a little something I was working on one night. I decided I’d try to write something about a dirt road or a car on blocks. And then I came up with this: *My neighbor saved up to buy a boat, not a trailer / His old man, he must’ve been the jailer. / Everybody’s got a big, black dog — a big, black dog, / and a jet ski in the front yard. / Man next door’s got a gym in his garage, / two doors down’s the Masonic Lodge / but look over there, over there / there’s a jet ski up on blocks*.”

“Shiiiit,” I said. “We’ll have to tell my little about you.”

“Nuh-uh, no way, no,” Raina said. “I forbid it.”

“What if she could help you make some connections in the music scene? Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Mmmmm,” she pretended to ponder it. She pursed her lips and was quiet for twenty seconds, which was an eternity in Raina Time. “I’ll think about it. I’ve gotta work on some other stuff, first.”

I smiled. “I remember you working on poems and songs all the time when we were in high school. You did … what was it? It was the one about the soap.”

”Oh, sure,” she said. “*Boy, you’ve got me floating just like Ivory soap. / Love is nature’s strongest dope.* I did one about some scrambled eggs or fried eggs, too, but I obviously can’t remember exactly how it went. It might've even been about hog's brains. You know, brains and eggs.”

"That's suitably country, though. And palatable, for the average person," I said. "There's the kind of person who wouldn't think the brains are actual brains. They'd think it's a euphemism.

And they'd ignore that part and just focus on the eggs. Better to be writing about eggs than, say, tonsil stones or spar mines or woolly aphids."

"What's that? That last one? Woolly aphids?"

"You know what I'm talking about. The little gnats covered in fluff."

"Oh, yes. The cotton-candy flies. They don't help a garden, but I love to see 'em. You know, that's just part of living in Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas. You get used to all of these things and don't even think twice about the things that could hurt you. A woolly fly messing with the plants. A mean starling that sounds like a swing rocking back and forth — really soothing, until it makes a nest in the tree next to your car. And then you've got to wash the car every day. Oh, and baked beans. I always make too many, put them in the fridge, and by the time I remember I have leftovers, they have fur growing on them."

"I hope your whole fridge doesn't look like that."

"No," Raina said. "It's just the baked beans. But you get what I'm talking about: all this stuff that looks good or tastes good or feels good, and then it ends up causing more problems down the line."

"But that's just part of life."

"Is it? Isn't there something else beyond that?"

"It's not about the stuff that happens beyond that," I said. "It's about the good stuff that's happening before and during. That's the stuff that we're supposed to be enjoying."

"Oh, the wise doctor has made her pronouncement. 'Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened.' That's what you're saying."

I nodded. And I nodded some more, because I didn't have anything else to say. The next time I spoke again, I asked her to let me do the driving for a little while. I didn't care if we had to stop somewhere hot or humid — it was one of those days where the air above the road was heavy and damp. But I didn't care about the thick air or the high heat. I just wanted to put myself in the driver's seat.

Foxface Rabbitfish

Before I decided to go into dermatology, I thought about going to veterinary school. I loved animals — I still do. But the way I had a love for living animals, Raina and Alma had a greater passion for finding dead ones. They loved fossil-hunting; they'd haul coral and fish skeletons up from the lake and drop them off on our grandmother's front porch.

Raina, in particular, liked fossilized fish. She even had a book filled with illustrations of fossils, and she'd read out the names of the different fish — my favorite being the foxfaced rabbitfish. I didn't even know what one looked like, but I knew I liked the name. I loved a creative name, even if I didn't know what it represented. Raina, of course, was more into the real thing — the meat and the bones.

She'd trace the outlines of their skeletons, and she'd marvel at how something that was dead was still with us, and perfectly preserved, at that. She wasn't *obsessed* with cult-y stuff, but she had a clear preference toward solving the mysteries of both life *and* death. Sometimes, this involved logic. At other times, she turned to more esoteric means. She found a pack of tarot cards at a Goodwill and shuffled through them every morning. One day, her (relatively religious) parents caught her with the cards. They said she could keep them if she'd learn one actual card game – and use them for non-tarot purposes. So she did. That was just like her, to approach things stubbornly.

She was always afraid of seeming like she was all talk and no action – probably because she talked so much.

There was a small part of myself that I could see reflected in her. We were adventurous, we were eccentric, but we were careful when it came to making our next move.

We shared some ancestors, of course, but we also had other things going on in our family circles. I felt like I owed some of my meanness and some of my perseverance to my Euro-Bajan ancestors, settlers who left the island after a couple of generations. The patriarch of the family became a Quaker, abandoned the island plantations, and still ended up settling in the South. That's where they showed their Quaker oats — all over the South. It was all so familiar — the heat, the humidity, the Atlantic Ocean, the pain.

Our shared ancestor, the Congolese-descended Texan, ended up moving around for different reasons. I had thought they ended up back in Kentucky because they finally gave up on finding a welcoming place out west, but I'd come to realize they'd all journeyed back to be near family, near the Old Homeplace, because they were too impoverished to establish themselves elsewhere. And the financial factor, that was nothing — nothing compared to losing family connections.

I was glad that my family tree had coalesced in one place, right in the middle of the rivers of western Kentucky. I was amazed that people from the islands and people from the continents that bordered the eastern Atlantic had managed to come together *here*, to help their descendants survive and to thrive. We had only just reached the "thriving" stage in the past generation or so, but I felt that they'd be glad to see that we didn't *have* to grow sorghum anymore. (One of our cousins still grew sorghum, but that was by choice.)

It wasn't so much that an "outlaw" influence from Texas influenced my own family — not so much as it influenced Alma. In her case, she knew other folks who still lived in Texas. She had one branch of Texas outlaws on some other side of her family: folks who'd settled in far western Texas sometime around the 1940s or 1950s. But for me, the Redlegs and a grandparent who lived in the Keys were the ones who helped bring a more laid-back influence to my own life. We lived in a world with fewer boundaries, so I didn't mind playing outside all summer. Weaving clover into chains. Picking wild strawberries. Standing at the edge of the yard and watching the neighbors' pitbull puppies. Windows were thrown open all spring and all summer, ants crawled on the counter by the sink, and going over to Grandma's meant sleeping with the screen door opened.

I missed going back to that part of Kentucky — and I often revisited it in my memories. Usually right before falling asleep on a humid summer night, when I would pretend that I was back in that old wrought-iron bed, wiping crushed mosquitoes off my arms.

"I think the fella from Kentucky — Sands, right? I think he thinks she's got some guy out here. But she's just staying with her Lovelace cousins, as far as I know," Raina said. And then she laughed and laughed.

She'd finally given me a chance to drive, and after a quick nap, she was already ready to talk again. She mentioned this out of the blue, it seemed, but I could tell she thought she'd landed on something important. Some big important truth.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's funny. Valentine and Lovelace. Lovemore and Loveless, right? And she's constantly battling for love. She loves being in love more than she loves the act of loving."

"I … I have a confession," I said. "I was very much the same way. Just a few years ago."

"*No*," Raina said, half-surprised, half-amused. "What do you mean? Tell me."

"Truth be told, I'm even worse than Alma. There was a guy I'd had a crush on from freshman year of college. He had gotten a divorce. That's not unusual. But the way I found out was really bad. I was looking at obituaries and I saw his dad had died. And that's when I noticed that his wife's name wasn't there. They didn't have any other grandkids listed, either, besides his sister's son. This was important to me — when I realized there weren't any kids in his life, I decided he was fair game. So I called Nicole — she was from school — and she confirmed this."

“Wait a damn minute,” Raina said. “I have a lot of questions already, and most of them are gonna be about this man. But I have to stop you right here and ask why you did that? Why you called some girl and asked her? Is she related to him? And wouldn’t she have been suspicious? Like, why are you so interested in him?”

“No. It was really simple. She was, like, the class president or the class coordinator or whatever. She organizes class reunions. So I told her I wanted to send a condolence card to the family and I didn’t know what his wife’s name was, and did she know, and could she tell me, and — and then she cut me off and said, ‘Oh, baby, they’ve been divorced for a year and a half.’”

“I bet your ass was dancing,” Raina said. “I can see you right now. Oh, I *know* you were smiling so hard she could hear you!”

“Oh, no — I tried to be calm. And I did a good job, I think, because I asked if I needed to include any children, or just his name and maybe … So I trailed off like that. I left it hanging. And she told me it was just him now. So I thanked her. I can’t even remember if I sent the card.”

Raina screamed — this was a vicarious delight for her.

“Ooooh, I wish Alma were here! I’m about to say *A-HA!* more times than her man Bob Wills ever did. You’re gonna think I’m a yes-woman, the way I’ll be hollering out *yessss*. Now that I think about it, you were probably hollering out some yesses, too. Oooh! So if you didn’t send a card, did you send something else? A picture, I mean. You know what kind of picture I’m talking about.”

“I didn’t. But I did use the unfortunate things that happened to him as motivation. For myself, I mean. I knew he was single, so I thought I might have a chance. We actually worked in the same building — he worked in the credit union across from our office. I knew he showed up early. So I would start showing up at work about five minutes before he did, so I could wait for him and just stroll on in around the same time.”

Raina nodded and nodded. She approved of a planned “chance” encounter.

“So,” I said, “I checked my makeup and my outfit first, always — the extra five minutes gave me time to do that. And the outfits! God, I like to try to look good, but every outfit I wore was with him in mind. I actually wondered whether he would notice my body or not. I’m not as bleeding-heart as you are, but if another man complimented me, I would’ve cringed. Now, if *he* noticed my body, if I could feel his eyes lingering, I know I would’ve melted on the spot.”

“So what *happened*?”

“Well, we started saying hello to each other in the morning, but that … that was about it.”

Raina was miffed. She snorted.

“Well,” I continued. “That was about it for four months. And then we started sleeping together.”

The shouting and whooping started, after I told her that. She must’ve whooped and hollered for a minute straight.

“Wow. You think you know somebody. I — I didn’t know you had it in you. To orchestrate something like that. *Damn*. I sure am proud of you.”

“But the reason I told you all of this is to say that I’m no better than she is. I’ve chased a man who I knew I liked, even before he had any feelings in return. And he was also divorced. He just wasn’t a dad.”

“I hope he was a daddy, though,” Raina said. “I bet he was fine. You and I have similar taste, so I know he was something.”

She paused, made a wistful little sigh, and then started up again. “You know, you and I are a lot alike. It’s just the memory, that’s what it is. That’s what draws us back in. I rarely fall in love with a new man — it’s the memory of a man I’ve always known. It’s just the memory of him. That’s what I’m really in love with. The idea and the memory.”

“Well,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say. “I understand. All I meant by telling you all this is, I guess that we shouldn’t judge her.”

“Oh, man — if this family had to cast out the beams in our own eyes before going after the motes in each others, we’d be having a caper tossing contest.”

“A caper or a caber?”

“Both. I’ll toss some little pods if I feel like it.”

A Dream I Had (When I Was A Passenger)

As we closed in on Los Ybanez, I fell asleep. I was in the passenger's seat again, so it didn't matter if I dozed off for a few minutes.

I was back home again - not in Alabama, but back at my old home in Kentucky. I was cleaning the house, taking pictures off the wall, wiping dust and dead bugs off the back of each frame.

I felt guilty wiping up the dust, knowing that some of it was here when my grandparents were still alive.

Before I wake up again, I dream of a springtime field. The prettiest time of day at the prettiest time of year - the daffodils and the blue gill and the islands in the river and memories of love and being loved.

When I Wake Up, She Shares Her Song With Me

"I've figured it out now," Raina said. "It goes like this: *I drove four thousand miles, from the river to the desert twice – and this ain't my husband's truck. That man didn't even change the tires*."

She paused. I could tell she had more for me, but she wanted me to give her immediate feedback.

"Go on. I like it. But I know there's more."

"There is, yeah, but do me a favor and write this down for me. Here, here - I don't have a pen, and I don't need one, anyway. Take my phone, and open the notes, and just start typing."

I was obedient. I wanted to do this properly, because I felt like I understood Raina's potential. We could both bullshit Alma all day long, but I would never bullshit Raina. She had talent.

"Does this song have a title?" I asked.

"'This Ain't My Husband's Truck' - that's the working title. But I like it. It's got 'husband' and 'truck,' and those are big grabs. Let's go!"

She talk-sang more and more lines, and I was her dutiful scribe. She also offered commentary.

"Now, now, for the bridge. I was thinking about adding this: 'I shed my skin, and you were right all along - there was a snake under there after all.' But I don't know. It probably sounds too much like Hole. I'm indifferent to a lot of country-rock, outside of outlaw stuff. I don't want to go full grunge. So how about this: 'I shed my skin to make this song. And you were right - I was a snake all along' - no? No. That's still not right. Let me think."

She pondered it. I chimed in with a minor suggestion. "Isn't he the snake?"

"Hmmm," she said. "I don't know if the husband is the snake. Matter of fact, I don't even think there is a husband. It's more about, like, you think I have a man, but I don't. I'm an independent woman, and I'll be a *mean* independent woman if the occasion calls for it. So ... I still feel like someone's a bit of a snake. The person who's judging - maybe they're the snake. Anyway, I'll work on that part. Or work on another song, maybe, because I don't want to let that go. Oh, wow, Parker. This is a lot of fun. I'll be doing more of this. I will."

Years before, Raina shared a poem with me. She wrote it for some contest, if I remember right, and not for a class or a grade. This was the poem: *The land of the free is the land of the broke / and the land of the broken. / Broken-down car on cinder blocks in the backyard. / Broken-up houses after the hurricanes and tornadoes. / Broken bones after the rodeo.*

/ Broken shackles, yes, but also / broken horses and / broken spirits, broken dreams / broken promises – and just plain broke / without a dollar in my pocket, with no money to burn / and no way to earn more.

The way Raina wrote stuff like that, it impressed me. She could sear memories you didn't even know you'd had right into your brain. A permanent impression. She was good.

The rest of the ride, she lobbed some half-pondered lyrics at me.

"You took me to Missouri, man, you really showed me. / You saw my smile — it met my cheeks and my eyes. I saw your body — you made me sigh. / I saw some loving, even though there were lies."

" I'm a shed patched up with the sheet metal l eftover from the barn. / I've got rust on my sides — but I've only got you on my mind."

Raina couldn't do anything halfway. Somewhere, about a hundred miles from our destination, I knew that she'd make something out of all of the stray lines.

Fanfare

When we arrived at Alma's new place — it's her other cousins' place, but they'd decided to let her use it — she was already waiting for us. She was posing on the front porch, dressed up in something that looks like a Dallas Cowgirl's take on a Nudie suit.

"Well, how goes it? Was the drive just terrible? Or was it better than you'd expected? I don't mind a bit of scenery myself." Alma shouted all of this from her perch, but she hopped down the steps and ran over to the car.

"My God, Parker," she whispered. "It's good to see you. I saw Raina just a couple of months ago. But you're back east in Alabama and —″

"It's funny," I said. "You moved out here right when I was thinking about moving back to Kentucky."

"To *Kentucky*?"

She was flummoxed. Even Raina didn't know about this, but Raina has always been more even-keeled than either one of us. I looked at Raina and, without so much as a twitch or a shrug, she turned to Alma and nodded. And there we stood — three cousins and a Mustang.

"Well, I'll be," Alma said. "Listen, why don't you all come on up into the house. It's mighty nice, I think."

“It looks lovely to me,” I said. “I can’t wait to see the inside.”

“We just saw the proverbial miles and miles of Texas — six and a half hours’ worth of sweat and tears,” Raina said. “So I’m ready to see the innards, too, if you don't mind giving us a tour. Maybe wipe my face with a cold rag, if that’s alright? And have a glass of cold water, if your ice maker works.”

We went inside, following Raina’s pronouncements, and we had a light dinner together. (It was a light dinner, because Alma wasn’t used to cooking for three.) We used our tiring trip as an excuse to focus on the food instead of on a deep conversation. Besides, we had plans to attend the county fair later that night, so I imagined we'd catch up with Alma while we were in the stands watching mutton busting, or something like that.

"Raina, you still like rides?"

"Love 'em."

"Well, there's something for everyone down there. Stuff where the bottom drops out, those swinging gondola things, all sorts of it."

"I want to see the rodeo," Raina said. "I think there's a whole lot of animal cruelty that goes on at these rodeos, but I still want to see what’s going on. It's dangerous. But I can't look

away."

I suddenly felt as if they were speaking in metaphors — speaking about a particular person. I realized there was some stuff they hadn't clued me in on. So I took the bait and I bit down.

"Who is he?"

"Who do you mean?" Alma asked, in a strained attempt at nonchalance.

"Who are you seeing down here? Or out here, or over here, or whatever. Who is he?"

"It ... it just so happens that we're not very far from Austin. I was at an event, really, and I met this nice gentleman who has a very important job in Austin."

"Horseshit," I said. "I know that's gotta be two or three hours away."

Raina immediately held up her hand, waving it inches from my eyes.

"Five hours," I hooted. "Don't tell me he's some intern for a senator or some..." I trailed off. I already knew — somewhere, in the pit of my stomach, I knew she was working on a bigger fish than a small fry.

"He's a state senator."

"Jesus Christ." This came from Raina, not from me. I could tell that she already knew some of what we were hearing, but that it still disgusted her. Disappointed, but not surprised. Not surprised, but still upset. "A politician. She'll be after a murderer next."

"You don't have to say it like that," Alma said. She smiled, but it was a tight one.

"I'll say what I want to say. I can speak for myself. And I don't think it's a good move. What else are we supposed to make of it? And what about Mr. Sands? Is he just ... stranded on the side of the road now? Did you glance in the rearview mirror before you drove away?"

"I'll tell you more, later on. But we're ... we're taking things slowly, and keeping things private. I know how to keep a secret, you know. So we're minding our own business and taking it slow."

"And he lets you leave the house dressed like that?"

"If I'm going to the fair? Then ... yes, of course. It's only natural to want to have some fun, girls."

"Corndog, Raina? Or maybe you'd like some funnel cake?" I was working on some funnel cake, but after eating a few strips, I realized I was in over my head. "I'll share."

“I bet he’s a Libertarian, if he isn’t a Republican," Raina said. I could tell she felt a little guilty for jumping right in, just by the twitch of her lips. I wasn't surprised or offended when she sighed, grabbed my plate, and then suddenly pushed it back toward me. "Senator Sex,

that’s what I’m calling him. No. No. Thinking about it makes my stomach hurt. And I don't need any fair food, anyway. I'm full. Besides, you know what I really want to talk about. I can’t quit thinking about that man. She has a picture of him on her phone. He’s standing in front of a big dually. It’s huge, but it’s clean. So I doubt it’s a farm truck. It’s all some performative bullshit. He’s too clean cut. Gives off a frightening vibe. Too squeaky clean — like they’ve *just* scrubbed the blood and guts off him. You just know the people in his district wouldn’t elect a Democrat.”

“But *you’re* not even a Democrat. You’re an extreme left-wing —”

“So what?” Raina said. “Who else is going to get stuff done here in Texas? He’s bound to be one of those three. I bet he's a "No Labels" Conservative. Jesus. You just know he isn’t a Democrat.”

“He could be.”

“Who would vote for him?”

I pulled up a senate district map on my phone. “Look — oh, that's just a piece of hair. Okay. Look there, at southern Texas. And look at Houston. Look at that whole part of the state. Mexican Americans would vote for him, probably.”

Raina fixed me with a violent stare. I realized she objected to my phrasing, to speaking so broadly about a group of people. I almost said, “For you to be part Spanish, you ought to get a little mad at yourself.” But I realized I would be digging myself into a hole, and that might make her madder.

"Well, possibly. Some would, some wouldn't. But it can't be that he's ... *you know*. Surely she wouldn't just ... I ..."

I couldn't think of anything else to say. We both knew that Alma was capable of doing just about anything.

Alma could hold someone in contempt for years. After any slight, perceived or real, she fully committed to judging them harshly for all the other things they'd done. Raina had grudges, but Alma just had harsh memories. She wouldn't act out in cruelty, but she wouldn't be quick to forgive you, to be kind, or to be sympathetic.

I found this out one day when we were talking about Rachel Dycus. Rachel was a local celebrity of sorts — local to our part of Kentucky. She was a show runner and a TV writer. I didn't know the first thing about writing for TV, and I still don't, but everyone knew about Rachel. She'd made something called a limited-run web series, or web serial, or something like that. It was only supposed to be a few episodes long. It was about a small resort town — and a quarry town, with gravel pits near the lake. The town was called Berry's Ferry. Both the town and the show had the same name. And the show was much buzzed about — to the point that it became a surprise hit.

Berry's Ferry — the show, not the town — was mostly about these three teenagers who were coming of age between 2007 and 2011. Every episode was supposed to represent a significant moment from each year. Getting a driver's license, trying to get ready for college, spending the summer trying to have fun in between summer-job shifts — all of the typical stuff you'd see on a coming-of-age television show. But *Berry's Ferry* was a bit different. It was still pretty quotidian, but there were things about the show that were different.

The three main characters lived in a quasi-fictional town called Berry's Ferry. (There's a real place called Berry Ferry, with no possessive apostrophe, but I'll get back to that.) Berry's Ferry was the "lesser" resort town in the area; Cornflower was the fancier town just up the lake. Same lake, by the way — but Cornflower had fancier amenities and facilities. Cornflower had a country club; Berry's Ferry had the Fur-N-Feather Inn. This hunting lodge, which was basically a twelve-room motel with a bean-shaped swimming pool, was owned and operated by one of the main character's families. (I'll get back to that, too. For now, I'll just mention that the Fur-N-Feather was featured prominently throughout the show.)

People in Cornflower may've been better off financially than their peers in Berry's Ferry, but all their wealth couldn't have spared them the misfortune of being located in the same exact county. This meant that the kids who lived in both towns — each with a population of around 2,000 — had to attend the same high school. The county was so small that it only had one school district. Hell, the county was so small it only had one working stoplight. The rest of the streets just had sun-bleached stop signs — signs that wouldn't be replaced unless somebody stole them, which wasn't unheard of. Lots of high school kids stole roadsigns to decorate their bedrooms. It was free — as long as you didn't get caught.

The people in the area, for the most part, had regular jobs: fixing outboards on old boats, serving at local restaurants or the nearby state park, or doing something over at the quarry. These were people who knew how to winterize a trailer and wrap a pontoon, people who knew how to gut a fish, people who knew the difference between #8 and #11 gravel. This show was relatable for all the folks who grew up in backwoods areas, where the algae-covered rocks at the lakeside beach felt more familiar than the soft-but-distant sands of Myrtle Beach and Gulf Shores. Houses in the area had torn umbrellas on their back patios, old cars that said *Datsun* instead of *Nissan*, and everybody either had a family member lodging or working in the state prison. I could relate to all of this. For people from the Valentine family, as a whole, this lifestyle was very familiar. So I wanted to watch the show.

Going in, I assumed the show would be a typical romantic comedy-type sitcom — rich boy meets poor girl, poor boy meets rich girl, something like that. But it didn't quite go that way. Two of the main characters were dating characters who lived in Cornflower, and the third one had another best friend whose family owned the Camwell Estate, the biggest wedding venue in the area. (Weddings, by the way, were a huge source of income for the folks in the area. Hunting trips. Weddings. Spa visits. "Rustic" summer vacations. All of the typical resort town stuff.)

Remi — named after the Remington rifle, of course, because her parents are avid hunters — was arguably *the* main character of the show, and her friendship with Courtney Jay Camwell was one of the biggest draws of the show: that a rich girl and a poor girl could see each other as genuine friends. Courtney Jay was probably the fourth main-ish character, but

the show really revolved around Remi, Annie Beth, and Georgia. They were three funny best friends. And that was enough.

The first episode, which I watched rather expectantly, was called *In These Days of Evil Presidentes.* It was set during 2007. I honestly thought it might be a political statement, you know, about the last gasps of the Bush era. But I found myself fully sucked in by the joke, and by the familiarity of the show.

It started with a voice over. It was Annie Beth, I think, and she said something like, *"Karl Marx once said that farmers needed to pack it in and leave the countryside for the cities, so that they could join the other workers. And it made sense to me. See, I've lived here all my life, and everyone I know lives like they're poor-ish, but wants to pretend to be rich. Isn't that nuts?"*

That leads into a scene where all three main characters are being chewed out in the principal's office. They've been called up to take random drug tests, because all three of them are student-athletes. (It's later revealed that one of them is a golfer and that the other two play chess and bowling. Not because they really want to, but because students could join any athletic team as an alternative to PE.) None of the girls will do it. One of them confesses that she peed about ten minutes before the drug test, and the others admit the same thing. The principal temporarily suspends them, and tells them they can come back to school in two days, where they will have another chance to pass the drug screening.

After being suspended, the girls walk out to parking lot, get in Georgia's car, and head back to their little hometown. The viewer gets a good glimpse at both Cornflower and Berry's Ferry, and notes the differences between the two towns. We also hear the conversation the girls have on their car ride. Two of them admit that they were telling the truth about having gone to the bathroom right before the test, which was just their rotten luck; the third one admits that she knew she would fail if she had to take it that day, because she'd started smoking weed again. This is the girl who plays chess, which is supposed to be funny, I guess.

The girls then talk about how they want to spend the upcoming summer. One of them knows someone who's going to Coachella. This friend or cousin or neighbor is going to see the Arctic Monkeys. This was an inspired name-drop, by the way. The viewers will realize that these girls are actually sort of cool if they were listening to the Arctic Monkeys back in their *Favourite Worst Nightmare* era.

Twenty minutes later, the episode wraps up with one of the girls winning a radio contest. The grand prize? Four tickets to Bonnaroo. It’s only a couple hours up the road, so the girls are excited. Most of them, anyway. Georgia complains about this, because (to her, and to lots of other people, probably) Bonnaroo is no substitute for Coachella.

“And who’s going to be headlining? God, it’s gonna be something miserable and depressing. Like The White Stripes.”

The very next scene — which is also the very last scene — shows the girls in the throng of people at the headline event. And they’re all singing along to We’re Going To Be Friends. Now, I don’t know much about performance rights, but I know they couldn’t afford the rights

to that song. So the girls were miming or mouthing the words, as if they were singing, while a voice over offered some context for the scene.

It was Georgia speaking. She said, "We didn't know it then, but fifteen years later, we would laugh about how we had the chance to see The White Stripes before they disbanded. We slept under the same stars Lily Allen, even though we always sleep under the same — look, we were in the same town, alright? And it was cool. We were cool."

That was it. That's how the first episode ended. And people loved it — the episode and the show. But I knew one person who didn't like everything about *Berry's Ferry.*

"Have you seen that show about Berry Ferry?" Alma had asked me. We were talking on the phone about something else, but I could tell she had something to say about … something. "It's really about the town — like, it's *really* about people around here. The Kountry Kitchen, you know, that's a real place. And —"

"Didn't they film in and around town? Did you see any camera crews?"

"Yeah, I saw them filming some outdoor scenes up around the lake. But I didn't even see any actors. I just thought they were from the college, filming a nature documentary for a school project, doing stuff like that. Anyway. I feel like I know the characters — no. I don't mean in a good way. I feel like Rachel Dycus made a show about real-life people and just swapped out the names. Didn't even bother changing the stories."

"Who? Which people?"

"Annie Beth and her mother."

"Do tell."

"Oh, I will. All those hints about alcoholism weren't a joke, even though she wrote the show that way. That was some serious shit, all those DUIs. You know I hate a drunk driver. But I'm also pretty mad about the part she stole from me. Let me tell you about *that*."

"What?"

"She stole an entire conversation we had in 2012 and put it in her show. Watch the 2011 episode. I can tell you from memory what we said, and you can compare it to her stuff. It was me and Maggie Oaks talking in homeroom. Maggie said, *I was putting together another outfit that I saw on Polyvore. I have everything in my closet — the brown boots and the red tights. But there's one thing I still need.* I think Rachel Dycus used those exact words. But anyway. I asked Maggie what she needed. She said something about a feather, and I asked her about it, and she said she needed a red and blue and brown feather. Those were the exact colors they mentioned on the show."

"… okay."

"No, but listen. It's not even the effin' colors being the same. I could get over that. It's this next part. Annie Beth and Georgia are talking in that scene, right? Well, in real life, Maggie

and I were going on about the feather. I said, *Oh yeah, I've heard about those feather extensions. Julian Casablancas and Selena Gomez wear 'em.* And then she said, *Wouldn't you like to get one? We can go to my mom's friend's salon together.* And I said, *Hell no! I won't do it, I just won't. I'd much rather have some hair tinsel. I'm not putting anything that was on a bird's ass on my head!* I thought that sounded familiar, because it was familiar. Those were the same words that came out of my own mouth."

I could tell she had more ammunition, so I let her keep going.

"Maggie said to me, *If you have a real feather in, like, how do you wash it? Can you wash it? I'm so confused. What if it comes out?* And I said, *They make clip-ons. With plastic feathers. That way, we wouldn't have to worry about the bird-ass problem.* That's exactly how I said it, and that's *exactly* what's on her little show."

"Maybe she's just inspired by —"

"Inspired, *my ass*. It makes me wonder if she just walked around our high school with her Voice Memos open, recording everyone's conversations." Alma sighed. "I had to quit watching all of it after I saw that scene, because it just made me furious. Like, if I'm going to contribute material to your show, then you'd better give me some credit. It just makes me mad — I wonder how much of that show is stolen material."

"It's a good show. And it's relatable. But now that I know she had dozens of unpaid writers, then … well, I don't know."

"It's not that she's taking real things and putting a twist on 'em. It's the fact that she took exact conversations and put them on her show. Brazen bitch."

"Is that the only thing she stole from you?"

"From me? Probably. From my friends? No. Annie Beth is obviously Kimmy Jefferson. One of my real-life good friends. Her mom's brother is the one who runs the hunting lodge. And she took their family stories and ran with them. Sheeeesh. It's a wonder she even bothered changing the names."

"Why doesn't someone sue her?"

"Ahhh, they aren't gonna do that." Alma laughed, but she didn't sound amused. "It wouldn't be a good move. Ever since that show came out, more and more people are coming to town. It draws tourists. It's good for the local economy. But listen. If I ever see Rachel Dycus in person again, I'm punching her in her face. Right in between those over-drawn eyebrows."

"I'm not saying you're overreacting. Maybe you aren't. But when I was in high school, I wrote this poem about a plane crash that happened in the area."

"Patsy Cline."

"What? No, not Patsy Cline. That was down in Tennessee. I'm talking about this plane that crashed just outside of town. To this day, they don't know if it was intentional or not. The

wife and husband were on the plane together. He was flying, and they say she yanked the controls or whatever they're called. And then the plane crashed. That much is true. But what was going on there? Was he cheating or something? Did she have some sort of trauma? Why would someone do that? Or was it just an accident? I have no idea. But I wrote a whole poem about it, about *not knowing how Icarus felt until we were both falling together*. Something like that. Even though I knew people would know who I was writing about."

"Hey. That's nice. Actually, no, it isn't. People died in that one, so it's not so nice after all. Your poem was probably a nice little memorial."

"I tried."

"Well. I'm trying to say that it just isn't the same. What she did to some of these people, telling their stories and not even changing a word. And now that I think about it, it makes me … I'm just … I'm so mad that I'm losing it! I *do* remember another thing that she stole from me. From me and Kelsey Garland. It's one of the jokes from the second episode."

"Okay."

"It went like this. Kelsey and I would just be talking. And I would say, 'What are you doing this weekend?' And Kelsey would go, 'I'll probably go to church.' And I would say, 'Both days?' And she would say, 'Nah, just Sunday morning. You should come with me!' And I would say, 'Ooh, where do you go? Should I bring my guitar?' This was funny to me, because I can't play a damn thing. But anyway. Kelsey would say, 'Ah, no, you can't! You can't bring any instruments to the Church of Christ!' And then I would say, 'Well, what are they gonna do? Kick me out for being the best musician at the Church of Christ? I'd like to see what they'd do if I called myself the best guitarist in the whole church. They couldn't prove me wrong! Not with everyone watching!' And then Kelsey would say, 'It's an easy win. Like challenging a Baptist to a drinking contest — you know they'd win, but they can't do a thing with everyone watching!'"

"So you both made fun of Baptists and Church of Christ folks in front of a room of Baptists and Church of Christ folks? Remind me what *our* great-grandmother was again?"

"She was a Campbellite. But she converted over from Methodism. We went from being Methodists to Campbellites to Capitalists, worshippers of the purse and the almighty dollar. Couple of big lapses in judgment there."

"Dear Lord — you shouldn't be saying that."

"What? Worshippers of the purse?" she asked.

"No. *Campbellite*. I think that's sort of cruel. But you really went there, didn't you?"

"Hell. If I'm talking about Campbellites, I'm talking about Campbellites. Not Glen Campbell fans, either. I'm talking about the people who judged our family for — well, *anyway*. I'm willing to shrug it all off. It's just something to laugh about. And most of the people would just laugh. It was just some fun. Even the teachers would laugh."

She paused, tittered a bit, and then launched into another story.

”We’d come up with all these preposterous things. A Fifth Baptist Church, you know, things like that. That you could probably have a drinking contest there, but then they’d be setting up a tent in the tobacco patch across the road. The Sixth Baptist Church, then. And most people knew it was just silly. A little mean, but silly. I promise — I *promise* that most people laughed, because we were all part of those groups. We weren't punching down, right? Just punching over. Well, that bitch Rachel filed the serial numbers off of our jokes. She polished them up, yeah, but we were the ones who came up with this stuff. And she put it in the second episode, when they go to that church basement birthday party.”

“I remember that part. Where they find the booze in the basement.”

“I’m fuming mad. Just talking about all this makes me want to hunt her down and make her apologize. If you see Rachel Dycus before I do, tell her that she owes Alma Valentine a big paycheck! I’m her best writer!”

Something Else

Alma didn't tell me until later that Georgia — the most smart-mouthed and defiant *Berry's Ferry* character, the most mature of the three best friends — was almost entirely based on Bren Daniels.

Bren. I remembered her well. Raina and Bren — short for Brenda, named after after her late grandmother — would hang out every summer. In the summertime, our whole family would reconvene. Sometimes, our visits would overlap for days. Sometimes, we'd be together for weeks or even months. But Raina usually spent time with people outside of our family circle, and Bren was her favorite person in town.

They were both sort of … above it all. They had read Ghost World, but they'd never seen the movie. That sort of thing. They were both always trying to cut to the quick of things, but also to fly a little higher than all the other birds. Not out of a commitment to excellence, or purity, or intellectualism — but because they both thought there was something greater out there, something that would help them make sense of everything right and everything wrong. And then they discovered *The Stranger*.

The summer that they were both sixteen — the summer that Alma and I were both fifteen — Raina came back to Kentucky, as was customary for her, and she and Bren talked about philosophy. Later, she told me, there was so much of it that she didn't understand. But Bren did. Bren understood just about everything, and she had the patience to explain it all.

They did everything that summer. They watched a lot of Blaxploitation films on Turner Classic Movies' late-night lineup. They also watched intense Swedish films, where witches levitated over their beds after having sex with awkward mortal men. They read the aforementioned philosophy books, and they read dollar-store romance novels they found at someone's Meemaw's house. They made homemade ice cream and slept under the stars.

Two years later, Bren overdosed. Around that time, that was when I suspected Raina might've been in love with Bren. When we spent time together a couple of years later, we stopped by the cemetery to put flowers on all of the Valentine graves.

"Wait, wait, we can't leave before I give her *these*," Raina said. She went over to the trunk of her car and pulled out a gorgeous red and orange bouquet. They were plastic flowers, of course, but the spray was huge.

"Now, you're probably wondering how I did it — I took three of them, cut the stems, and rearranged 'em. I hot-glued it back together, and this is her bouquet. This is what she would've liked."

She placed the flowers in the little metal vase, dusted some dried yellow grass off the base of the headstone, and addressed the stone directly. "I'm getting things ready for your birthday, because I know it's still hard for your mama. I miss you. We … I just miss you so much."

As we walked away, back to the car, I had to ask her. I just had to do it.

“No,” she told me. “Of course, I was a little bit in love with her brother Andy. He was so sexy. I mean, he still is. But he played baseball *and* basketball. The build on him, *my God*. He’s married now. Happy wife, I bet. And he was so nice, too. ‘He’s a good man, Savannah’ — no, but he really is.”

She laughed — a genuine Raina laugh. And then she turned back to me, grabbed me by the elbow, and then looped my arm around her waist. I realized she wanted a hug, and so I pulled her around to face me. I knew she didn’t want to cry, but she wanted me to give her comfort. Not permission to break down, but real comfort.

“But … you know how it is,” Raina said, slowly. It was like she believed the words, but like she felt guilty for saying them. “I really felt like she was my sister. You would understand, because you have a sister. But I don’t have anybody. I had her, but … now I’m back to not having anybody.”

She started sobbing. I held her, and there we stood, halfway between the headstones and the cars. Halfway between the world of the dead and the living dead. And I didn’t know what to do, so I kept holding her. And she kept saying something, but I just couldn’t understand her. So I held her, and I told her that she was a good friend. Such a good friend.

Later on, I realized what she was saying. “*I wish I could’ve stopped her. I wish I could’ve stopped her.”*

But she and Raina were such forceful people. Raina was bold in a still-waters-run-deep way. She had the capacity to surprise, and she was well aware of it. Bren was the same way. Bren had surprised even Raina when she’d died. But Raina still felt like she could’ve done something . If she’d just been around to say the right thing … but life is unscripted. Lives aren’t saved by cool quips or one-liners.

Alma told me never to mention the show, even if I enjoyed an episode. The month that the last episode was released, she made a point of asking Raina if she’d ever seen any of Berry’s Ferry.

“Why would I watch that?”

“Well, I mean — I didn’t think you had. I thought maybe you’d think it was hard to see someone so much like…”

She waited. She didn’t want to say Bren’s name.

“I don’t have to watch *Berry’s Ferry*,” she said. “I’ve already seen that place. I’ve known it all.”

The Lake

Kentucky was home. Texas was more of a vacation home. Kentucky came first, then Texas, then Kentucky again — and that was back in the 1800s, the first time our family tried to get away from it all.

But they came back — back to the burley tobacco and the limestone quarry and the soft, curling rivers. Back to the lake that smelled like mud and dead catfish. Back to the barges and the flooded corn fields and the tomato plants that needed constant succoring. Back to the mosquitoes and fuzzy aphids and all the little critters I mentioned earlier. Even the weasels. Even the water moccasins. Kentucky was home.

From there, over the next two hundred years, the family spun out in different directions. Kentucky was the center of our solar system — the scalding-hot sun. Three planets orbited Kentucky — Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas. And then the ones who landed in Tennessee went down to Alabama, and the ones in Arkansas teleported down to Texas. At this rate, we're all gonna end up in Texas.

But it's just as likely that we might all wind up back in Kentucky. As I'd mentioned to both Raina and Alma, I was thinking about relocating to Kentucky permanently. Raina was surprisingly thrilled.

"I wouldn't have moved down to Paris if I'd known you were looking at a lake house in Kentucky," she said. She put a biscuit on my plate. We'd started eating breakfast over an hour ago, but we were still planted at the kitchen table. We were waiting for Alma. "Is it right on the water? Shit — I don't need this Texas heat. I'm ready to get back to livin' like grandma did. I just need the banjo, the porch overlooking the river, a little flyswatter —"

"Humidity is a problem there," I said. "And it's only getting worse. Besides, I didn't know you were so taken with Kentucky."

"Oh, please — it's not so bad with the breeze coming off the water. You know that. And I don't have anything against the place. I have happy memories and sad memories there, but the happy ones are the ones that press down on my heart. In a good way, of course. Kentucky and north-central Arkansas — those places are home for me. Texas is alright, but it's where we Valentines come to figure things out before heading back home."

She stole a glance out the door, out at at the front porch, where Alma had been sitting for over an hour. She was on the phone with The Politician. And just as Raina had suspected, he was one of those fellows who called himself an "Independent free thinker" — though he wanted to mind everyone else's business. Right now, he was probably telling Alma what she could and couldn't do. But we didn't want to get involved — not right then, anyway.

"I don't know," Raina said. "Maybe Alma will find her place here. I just hope she breaks it off with him before he does something bad to her. Before he has his people dump her in a reservoir or something. It … it wouldn't surprise me if she never comes back to Kentucky,

not even to visit. Which is a shame, considering she lived there the longest. In my mind, it's her home, too."

We sat in silence for a moment. When I spoke, I changed the topic — just slightly. I pointed over at Alma and the porch.

"Back in the day, I would see older people sitting on the porch at four in the afternoon. I would think about how lazy they looked. And then when I turned 25, or thereabouts, I realized that that's all some of them have the energy to do. Just to sit with their head in their hands."

"I've felt tired like that," Raina said. "An all-over need for rest — the flesh and the blood and the bones, the body and the spirit. I've needed that rest. And I don't know if I could get it in Paris. I sure as hell couldn't get it out here, with all the ranch land. It's too vast and there's too much work. In Kentucky, I mean, there's work to do, too. Lots of work. And it doesn't always get done, but it waits. It's there the next day. And you don't have to feed it."

"You do, though," I said. "Think about the crops and the cattle."

"But *I* wouldn't be doing that. Not knocking it, sure — but someone else would be doing that sort of work. I'd work at one of the state parks or the lake resorts during the week, and then I'd write songs on the weekends. I'd drive down to Nashville once a month. I wouldn't wear myself out."

She paused. She nodded to herself — strictly to herself, as if she needed her approval more than mine.

"Yeah — I think we'd both have an easier time in Kentucky. I could rest, even in the shadow of the prison and the coal barges. Texas is a good place to get worn out. Kentucky is a good place to try to pull yourself back together again."

I Already Knew

Even then, on that casual visit to Texas, I could see that they were both aiming at bigger things. Alma was rapidly failing upwards — though I admit that it took me awhile to realize that all of her behavior was almost entirely calculated, right down to when she checked the mail, or which day she did her laundry. Luck was only part of her success.

With Raina, the hardest working of us cousins, hard work *and* luck were part of the equation. She spent a lot of time writing, and a lot of time revising her existing work, but she'd finally warmed to the idea of me getting her in touch with Laura Beth. They realized it would be a good move for both of them — the eager performer and the throw-it-all-in songwriter.

"Okay, I think I've got something here. 'Nehi To A Grasshopper' — like the drink. Now, this song is a lot like the stuff Shel Silverstein did for Loretta Lynn. So if it's a little too hokey — well, she'll tell me. In the meantime, she's going to listen to the one about the truck. It's completely ready now. I'm proud of that one."

"What about the one with the jet ski up on blocks? I like that one."

"She knows about that one, but I told her there were some bits that I want to change or rearrange. She told me she'll listen to both versions and then we'll talk about it," she said, with a hint of a smile. "You know, when we first started talking about doing this, I didn't think I'd want to work with her. But she's being remarkably accommodating."

Raina had told me that she didn't want to be taken advantage of, but after finding out how honest Laura Beth was — and how much money her dad was willing to throw into her music career — Raina realized she had little to lose and everything to gain.

"If they don't think it's worth using, then they're not going to try to steal it and give it to someone else. Because if it's dogshit, then it's worthless to them. But if they can use it, they're going to try to do something with it. And give me credit for it, of course. I told her I'd recorded our first Zoom meeting, just in case she tried to steal my words. I told her I didn't care if she backed out of any of it, but that if she stole my shit, I'd really give her hell."

"And you told her about Alma and *Quarry Girls*?"

We'd taken to calling it *Quarry Girls*, like *Derry Girls*, because the Berry's Ferry Quarry was featured in a couple of the episodes. This also kept Alma from getting too worked up about that rotten business.

"You know it. I told her that it's a wonder she doesn't fly out to L.A. and strangle her, the way she talks about her. And then I said, 'Sorry, am I allowed to talk about this stuff with celebrities?' And she said, 'How the hell would I know? I'm a celebrity's *daughter*.' So … so she's more down to Earth than I'd expected. I know she could double-cross me, but I think she wants to succeed and then … well, I don't know. I get a small sliver of the pie, and maybe a chance to get my stuff in front of other people in Nashville."

“Mmm,” I said. “That’s the thing. She’s going to hog you from the other folks, if she thinks you’re really good. Better to lock you in and have you on her team. And it’s not a bad arrangement for either of you.”

“I feel like she talked to me as a favor to you, but now she really thinks I have that thing that she’s looking for.” She sighed. “Maybe the grasshopper thing is too corny. But I’ve worked on plenty of others.”

She told me about the song about a guy who wouldn’t hit a lick at a hognose snake. One about someone who did fentanyl before clocking in at the chicken plant, with fireworks going off inside his head so that he could stomach his work on the deboning line. One about finding secrets hidden on a cucumber vine, because the kudzu was loaded down with too many secrets from the family next door. Another one about hands covered in blood and blackberry juice. And one about the lower reaches of the Ohio River being where Kentucky would get its tramp stamp.

And then there was *it*, of course. If you’re familiar with either Laura Beth Barton or Raina Valentine, then you know about their most popular song. Because I know both of them well, I can tell you that both of them have put it in their top ten. But it’s not their all-time favorite. Their all-time favorite is the same song, funnily enough.

But that’s not the song I want to talk about. The song I’m thinking of is, of course, “Ogalala.”

You were my inland ocean, in springtime and through summer rains. And me, with my foolish emotions, I sure caused some hurricanes.

Raina had already written all of those words, but she hadn’t showed them to anyone yet. She was still more sold on making something big out of the song about the snake. I have to thank Laura Beth for changing Raina’s mind about that one. They redirected their energy into Ogalala, and they made something timeless. But before they got to that point, Raina was trying to write something new every single day.

“I’ve just had all sorts of ideas,” Raina said. “I’m glad that I’m finally getting to use them.”

Getting Odd, Getting Even

Alma and Raina were always saying something. They could go on and on, but most of our conversations were worth having. Most of the things they said struck me as funny, or interesting, or notable. I remembered most of them without having to think too much about it, because their quips left an impression. Other times, I'd just have to write them down, because I needed to see *that* in writing. I didn't keep a daily diary, but I kept a notebook in my bag. Maybe it makes me seem too much like a blackmailer, but I would write down the good stuff. My notebook was filled with two categories of content: to-do lists, and wild things I'd overheard. Many of these remarks came from my own family — from chats, from phone calls, from secondhand gossip. What can I say? These folks have always had a way with words.

Raina always knew how to make me laugh, even when she was irritated. On one of our trips to visit Alma on the far side of Texas — and there were many, as it turned out — we were listening to music. We'd quit talking, because it was so hot, and we had the music playing as background noise. Somewhere outside Abilene, she let her irritation get the best of her.

"*Christ*, turn off that Ernest Tubb shit," she said. "I can't concentrate at all. I like it well enough. I don't hate him, you know, but it's all them string instruments. They're just sawing through me."

She enjoyed the silence for about two minutes. She started sighing, and then she gave me instructions about what to play.

"Put on some Three Six Mafia — that's what I listen to when I get a headache. *What?* The beat always calms me down."

"It doesn't saw through you?"

"Of course it doesn't. How could a drumbeat saw through you? Drums aren't sharp. Cymbals, maybe - but *drums* aren't sharp."

Raina was the songwriter and the poet, but Alma offered the best descriptions of random people. She said she knew a woman who looked like she "combed her hair with an egg beater or a spatula." She also knew someone who "could benefit from using a jade steam roller all over that body," because even though Alma didn't know precisely what a jade roller did, she knew that this person needed "industrial-strength bodily intervention." Her friend's husband's sweaty work boots "smelled like stale crumble-in cornbread sopping up old buttermilk." All of her criticisms tickled me, no matter who she was going after: the "freelance pharmacologists" our cousins were dating, the blue jays that were "the pitbulls of the sky," and the previously-mentioned "Methodists-to-Campbellites-to-money-worshippers" that dotted our family tree.

"You know I've told you that that's offensive," I said.

"Which part? *Campbellite?* Or *money-worshipping?* That's one of the biggest religions in the country. It's second only to Methodism here in Texas. Now that I think about it, it probably overtook Methodism a couple of decades ago."

Alma could critique or be dismissive of anyone, from people she knew in real life to people she saw on TV. She described a has-been country singer as having a shrill voice that was so distinct, so obviously Kentuckian, that it would be a shame if she let it "wander across the coal fields and drift off, away from the limestone and the old iron furnace." She emphasized that this was a compliment. Shrillness, she said, is a commonality shared by many of Kentucky's best (and worst) singers.

Aside from people, she would wax poetic on the problems of the day. She was fond of saying things like "the Internet is the world's biggest high school" and "social media isn't a good place for anti-social people, *like yourself.*"

Raina once described Alma as the kind of person who doesn't remember if she shaved her legs two days or two weeks ago. But she'll notice a little tick crawling on your thigh and she'll pull it off before it can latch onto you. That's why she's valuable to a politician. She could notice *anything.*

She was also more logical than she might seem, with her awkwardness, her abruptness, her brazenness. She might act clueless, but she was always a few steps ahead. When she wasn't, she knew how to take a shortcut — and then she'd be *twenty* steps ahead. When our cousin wanted to take his new ATV out in the woods, she told him to follow the utility lines. She knew that the TVA kept that land mowed and manicured, and that he wouldn't get lost if he followed the lines. She was smart, and she was thoughtful - and when she could articulate her thoughts, she could be near-lethal.

Her sharp tongue would be an asset to Senator Sex. I asked her if she realized this.

"If you'll remember, I live in Texas now," Alma said. "And I've been saying I've lived in Texas my whole life — because I feel like I was dead before I moved here."

I laughed. "Oh, you're already there - you're going to be a great politician's wife."

"I wouldn't put it like that," she said. "I've had to practice, though. I admit it. I've done some studying and some learning. I've looked up the codes for airports in countries I'll never go to, just so that I know what sophisticated people are talking about. I've even learned about some of their colleges. I know where they're at now. Dartmouth is in New Hampshire. I didn't know that until three weeks ago. I'm still trying to find out where the rich Christians send their kids to school. And I don't even know where those schools are. Valpairiso? Villanova? I don't know anything about any of that. I still have miles to go. I only learned the other day that it's *Croozay,* not *Crew-set*. But I will be a good girlfriend, able to make conversation with just about anyone. Even people who think they're better than me."

She paused, long enough to take a sip of water from a non-branded metal bottle, and then she started up again.

"I don't want to be a politician's wife. I don't even want to be a wife. I'm not ready for that. I'm just trying to be *me*, Parker. Some people like me, and some don't. But I'm just the same as I've always been. And I'm always going to be a Valentine, because I was raised this way. There's nothing fake about us. We're made of some sturdy stuff - authentic stuff. Our people who went to the bluegrass dance on Friday night, the fishing hole on Saturday, the church on Sunday, and then back to work on Monday morning. Our women worked in the factory, making lamps, and coats, and bullets. Our men mined, ran the dragline out there, and did the cattle and the dairy and all that farming. Before that, they did the sharecropping. Generations of survivors. Our grandparents and great-grandparents survived all that hardship in Kentucky, and before that in Texas, and before that in Tennessee. We are descended from *bona fide* survivors. And I'm back in Texas, trying my damndest to make the family proud. I work hard, and I bring a little grit and gumption to the table. I'm serving grits every day. It's what I was put here to do."

"Great speech," I said. "It's all over the place, but it says a little bit of everything. You know, *you're* a politician, Alma."

"Nah, no. I'm just trying to tell you that I love you, and that I love my family, you know? Family. That's more important — and absolutely more intimate — than friendship or dating. It's more painful to be spurned by the only people who are *supposed* to love you. But we all do a good job of taking care of each other, and ..."

She paused. She picked at a hangnail — a nervous habit. She was nervous, and *that* made me think she was sincere.

"Listen, Parker," she said. "You might think I was being too dramatic, and maybe it was a bit much. But I really do love and appreciate you. We wouldn't be *us* without each other. You and Raina have made me want to be a better woman, and I think it's all because I know that I come from good people, who made more good people. You're both so good, and I want to be good, too."

I started to say something, but she jumped back in.

"I just think I had to come out to Texas to realize my full potential. And I'm going to do my best. I'm actually going to be better than I've ever been."

Rachel Dycus

About a month into Senator Sex's campaign, we found out that Rachel Dycus would be coming to Alma's place to film something.

"Is it … promotional stuff? She's making *ads* for the senator?" Raina asked.

"Well, I'll put it this way," Alma said. "She'll be helping us with the political advertising if we'll help her with a documentary."

"What's the documentary about?"

"About people who leave Kentucky," Alma said, and then gave me a pointed look. "And people who move back to Kentucky. I already volunteered you to talk to her about that."

"What?" I said. "No. No way. And — look, she may've told you she wanted to film a documentary about Kentucky. But I bet she's making a documentary about politicians, too. She's got access to —"

"I don't give a sweet fuckin' damn if she makes two hundred documentaries while she's down here. I just want her to make me look good. And I plan on making myself look good. You both have the opportunity to do the same — so take advantage of that."

I asked Raina to tell me a bit more about Rachel Dycus.

"The only thing I know about her now — as an adult, I mean, because I only knew *of* her as a teenager. But the only thing I know for sure is that when we were all college-aged, some folks had the impression she was a bitch. She donated money to her local NPR station just so that one of the hosts would give up their parking space at church and let her have it."

"What?" I was stunned. I didn't know there was a local NPR station back in that area, and I didn't know any of their … more open-minded reporters went to church. "I guess I didn't know Rachel was big on church."

"They're all Universal Unitarians."

"Dang," I said. I didn't know there were any Unitarian churches around there, in the Sea of IBLP.

"One very small one. Anyway, one of my friends told me that she couldn't judge her. When she was in college, she also bribed a guy to let her park off-campus. She didn't want people to see the Thin Blue Line sticker on the back of the car her mom lent her. She was so embarrassed — of course, she would use it to get out of a ticket. But she still felt sheepish about it."

Raina sighed, then spoke up again. "We all have our crosses to bear, I think, and when people can find a creative way to solve problems without hurting someone else, then I don't mind it

too much. Playing by the rules will hurt you *if* you don't realize that other people are bending the rules here and there. You can keep playing by the rules, if you want to. But you've got to save your anger for the more serious offenses. And I don't think Rachel's an evil person. More than that, you know, I'm impressed the Alma has forgiven her."

After that little speech, Raina told me a few other things about Rachel's earlier years. She told me that she would always wrap her hair in a scarf *and* put on a jacket in a convertible, because she was afraid of sunburns and windburns. She thought this was just her being too precise — but then she realized that she was the type to plan ahead. And she knew about all sorts of "fancy" things, like whist and mikado.

I told Raina that this made Rachel sound like she lived inside *Rebecca.*

"It wouldn't surprise me," she said. "She's a student of the past."

The End of The Beginning

I don't have to tell you everything else, Rachel, because you already know how it's turned out.

(Thank you for writing, again, and thank you for letting me use you as a sounding board. I know you'll keep all these letters and use them in another documentary. Perhaps you're next documentary will be political, or musical, or genealogical. If you'd like to use any of this material, feel free. Just give me some credit. I've long hoped that my name could be tied to something good.)

As you know, the senator won his election, was re-elected, became Speaker of the House, and is about to run for president. It's only a matter of time before he trots the Future First Lady onstage, introducing her to the rest of the country. She's very comfortable on camera, after having been featured in the documentary. She won't be a liability. *I only hope I'm not a liability.*

Raina, of course, is the Decca to Alma's Deborah. She hates the senator, politically *and* personally, and she won't be attending any campaign events. She might even be publicly critical of the man. (*To say nothing of the woman.*) But Raina is a talented songwriter. She's still putting out music, she just won a Grammy, she's got a ton of celebrity fans, and there will be people who feel cheered at the fact that the First Lady has such a spirited, talented cousin. Raina won't be a liability. *I just hope I'm not too much of a liability.*

You know that *I* am the problem cousin. I was once the sweet, educated, medically-inclined cousin. I was the big-hearted-but-practical cousin. But I let my heart get in the way of my common sense. Or my civility.

I was civic-minded, until I found out that we don't live in a caring society.

When I met my partner, I decided to move back to Kentucky. When he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, he decided that the only way to cope was to get back at some of his worst enemies, at some of the people who stood in the way of his survival. You know what he did - and you know who he went after. You know what *I* did. I never pulled the trigger, but I drove the getaway car. I was the accomplice. I had to serve time.

I wish I could say that life was like a Hitchcock movie, and that in a cruel twist of fate, we'd found out that he *wasn't* terminally ill. I wished he'd accidentally received the wrong results, or that he'd be able to take treatments and recover within months, within a year. I knew that was foolish. More sensibly, I wished that he'd be able to live, even if he spent the rest of his life in prison. But he died before his trial even started. If I can be proud of one thing, it's that he died outside of the prison - and that he *felt* like a free man.

He died on the porch of the lake house. I'm sure you knew that, just as I'm sure you know that I *did* have to show up for my court date, that I plead guilty, that I was sentenced. I don't know if you know what happened to the house, though. The house is in Raina's name *and* in my name, so it's being taken care of. When I get out of prison, I suspect that Raina will work out

a deal with me. Not because she has to, with both names on the mortgage, but because she wants to.

Raina, truthfully, has always been the best of us. Alma and I are both too selfish. Raina cares about people with their hands tied behind their backs, with their wrists in cuffs, with their feet shackled. Raina cares about people who can't help her.

I wish *Raina* would run for president. Perhaps you can convince her - or you can make a documentary about her. (Leave Alma out of this one. It probably comes as no surprise that Alma hasn't sent me so much as a birthday card, because she cares too much about a man who truthfully doesn't care all that much about her. Raina is more compassionate. She sends me a letter every month, even when she's busy. Sometimes, it's just a line on a page. And that's enough, really, to know that I won't be forgotten.)

In the meantime, the house is waiting for me. The lake is waiting, too. In two more years, when I'm released, the first thing I'm going to do is jump in the water.

I don't plan on drowning, Rachel - I plan on swimming. If I'm lucky, the Tennessee River will help carry me back home.

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